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ABSTRACT

Literature and studies on the influence and scope of youth sports were surveyed with particular attention to selected issues or aspects related to cultural pluralism in North America. An exploration was made of attitudes toward participation in youth sports, which were influenced by ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds of parents and children. Literature on sport socialization is limited to a large extent to the elite athlete, although socialization is also of significance to youngsters who participate in sports in a casual manner and for recreation. The effects of physical differences between children of different races, as well as the influences of peers, were cited in some of the reviewed studies that examined the longitudinal effects of early exposure to sports activities. A discussion is offered on the differences in attitudes toward sport held in North American and some Eastern European countries, including the Soviet Union and East Germany. (JD)

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Cultural Pluralism, Physical Activity, and Youth Sports[1]

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The widespread influence and scope of youth sports gives them a significant role in the lives of children, their families, the community, and society at large. The literature on youth sports, though emerging both in quality and quantity, is still based more on opinion, emotion and conjecture than on substantive data. Too often, however, the scientific literature, when available does not reach those who have a ready need for it, especially in terms of the relevance of this information to those actively and intimately engaged with children, youth and parents on a day-to-day basis. The conveners of this forum are to be complimented for this and other efforts at--so to say--bridging the gap and more or less getting at current problems and concerns, and their relevance to youth sports.

With this in mind, I would like to address selected issues or aspects related to cultural pluralism, physical activity and youth sports in North America. The topic is sufficiently broad, perhaps nebulous, but I will make an attempt at it. At the outset, I would like to offer several generalizations.

(1) Cultural pluralism. America and Canada have generally been described as "melting pots," an amalgam of individuals from ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds. The term ethnic is used variably. It is sometimes used as a substitute for the term race or a biologically distinct group, i.e. biological characteristics in common. It is also used as an indicator of a culturally distinct group. The term ethnic as an indicator of a culturally distinct group can include, for example, religious preference, language, rearing practices, dietary preferences and habits, attitudes, ethics, etc.

The term ethnicity is widely used, especially in light of the current resurgence of ethnic awareness. We are a culturally, plural society and not the "melting pot" predicted by many social scientists. True, there is a supposed American and Canadian cultural mainstream; but this stream has many bends and forks. The majority of Americans and Canadians still have a clear identification with their ethnic backgrounds and possibly still have strong ties with ethnic components of many cultures of the world. Many such ties are retained with European countries, and with the continued influx of migrants to the United States, many from Latin American and Asian countries, different ties are being introduced.

Quite frequently, biological and cultural homogeneity overlap or coincide, e.g., in colored minorities, and in religious and linguistic groups who share a common ancestry. In other words, some communities, or parts of wider communities, represent cultural as well as biological (racial) groupings. They are distinctive both culturally and biologically. With few exceptions, ethnicity in North America is usually viewed on a color or surname basis, i.e. American Whites, American Blacks, American Indians, Americans with Spanish (Hispanic) surnames (Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, Cubans, etc., an enlarging group based on current trends in Central and South America), and Asian-Americans (also increasing). Ethnicity is also extended on a language basis, i.e., English and French in Canada, and Spanish in the southwestern United States.

Of what relevance is this to youth sports? I will try to touch on it in more detail subsequently. In general, a younster's

view, preference, expectation, or persistence in sport, and also the family's view, may be influenced by his/her ethnicity. Activity, and health related habits and attitudes may be similarly influenced. A good example of health-related habits is dietary preferences.

(2) Physical activity. Physical activity is generally viewed as good for the individual, that is, the stress of activity, work, exercise, play, dance or sport, gives rise to beneficial physiological responses in the organism during growth and into adulthood. And, youth sports are a main channel of and influence on an individual's physical activity pursuits. Here, I would like to offer several generalizations. Physical activity has no apparent effect on stature in growing individuals and on maturation are commonly assessed. Physical activity, including training for and participation in sports is a significant factor influencing the growth and integrity of specific tissues such as bone, muscle, and fat, and the development and maintenance of aerobic capacity. Changes associated with physical activity are a function of the intensity and duration of training, and continued activity. Further, some changes are specific to the type of training, for example, muscle enzymatic changes with endurance and strength training. (See Malina, 1979, 1980, for a more detailed review of activity and growth).

(3) Youth sports. Historically, children have participated in sports for some time. The emphasis and popular interest in youth sports is a relatively recent phenomenon, perhaps having its roots in the advent of Little League Baseball (which began in 1939).

The social acceptance of and sanction to youth sports and those skills necessary in sport activities can give them an awesome significance not only in the child's world, but also in the world of parents who are often involved in their child's sporting pursuits. One can perhaps

raise the issue of not the child's readiness for sport, but of the readiness of parents for their child in sport. Parents' views of youth sports are in turn influenced by their ethnicity, among other factors (e.g., education, migration brackground, previous sports participation, social class, etc.). Think for a moment of a recent southeast Asian migrant whose youngsters might want to try baseball! Or, of a South American migrant, with a strong background in soccer for boys, whose daughter wants to try co-educational soccer! Or, the soccer programs of various ethnic enclaves in Milwaukee--Bavarians, Croatians, Serbs, etc.; how can these be integrated with other programs?

With the preceding in mind, I would like to address several issues apropos to youth sports. As noted earlier, the literature on youth sports is emerging both in quality and quantity. However, a good portion of our information is derived from elite athletes, those with a serious commitment to sport. There is much concern in this literature with the making of champions or gold medalists. This is a view perpetuated to a large extent by the media, especially via the sports anthologies.

The relevance of such an emphasis on elite athletes for youth sports takes two directions: first, in some sports, notably swimming and gymnastics for girls, outstanding achievements have been recorded at young ages, and second, because of this, there is interest in identifying in some form or other potential medalists at an early age. It has been proposed, and perhaps in some quarters believed, that by identifying exceptional talent at an early age and by introducing intensive training and/or instructional programs at an early

age, a youngster will eventually make it to the top! However, the number who make it to the national or international gold medal platform is miniscule, incredibly small. The media ordinarily focuses on this extreme minority. We are not told of the many youngsters who do not make it!

Although data are not extensive, some evidence suggests that early success in sport offers little or no promise of the same later on. For example, evidence from the Medford Growth Study (Clarke, 1971) indicates that outstanding elementary school athletes do not necessarily become outstanding junior or senior high school athletes. Put another way, the successful high school athlete may not have been outstanding at the younger ages. In the words of Bailey (1978, p. 109): "Could it be that intensive participation and competition in the under-eleven age group is not the great spawning ground it is purported to be?" Even if one assumes or accepts the notion that outstanding athletic potential can be identified at an early age, a primary mandate of those involved in youth sports is the long term activity and skill needs of all children.

This concern for the elite athlete, even at young ages, often enters into youth sports programs. There is at times much concern for the skilled or talented, often to the neglect of the others. For example, our YMCA soccer programs at the 6-7 and 8-9 age levels ordinarily run smoothly and coeducationally. But by 10-11 years, there is inordinate emphasis for the select terms, in contrast to the larger population of 10-11 year olds. One can inquire as to the effects of such selection on peer relationships and on the children's attitudes towards the sport or activity in general. This applies both to the

selected and the not selected!

How do youngsters become involved in sports? A good deal relates to the "sub-culture of youth," i.e., peer influence and interests. Yet, there is more to it than peer pressure, including, for example, the family, other social settings, the community, media, and so on. Hence, the process whereby a child becomes involved in sport has received some consideration. How is a youngster socialized into sport? The converse of this question perhaps merits more serious consideration. How is a youngster socialized away from sport?, i.e. the so called drop-outs.

The literature on sport socialization, though growing, is limited to a large extent to the elite athlete. Relative to youth sports, one can inquire why do children with similar physical or physiological characteristics get involved in different sports? This literature has focused on significant others (parents, coaches, leaders, peers), social settings (school, non-school, play), and role learning (here focus has been on gender--the role of male/female models, and on race--Black and White to exclusion of other ethnic groups). The role of these three, i.e., significant others, social settings and role learning, can be supportive to youth sports participation, indifferent to youth sports participation and possibly in conflict (see McPherson, 1978).

The process of becoming socialized into youth sports probably begins early as the child realizes sports constitute an important aspect of life. The role of the parents and older siblings are especially important at this time, both in terms of arousing interest

and providing opportunity to try and to practice skills. At school, the youngster's interest and efforts in sports are reinforced by the peer group, school, TV and other media, and other agencies. Thus, it is no wonder that many organized leagues begin at 8 or 9 years of age, although they do occur earlier. Through actual competition, reinforcement from peers, coaches, and parents, and the models provided by the media, the youngster learns to behave as an athlete and is given an opportunity to demonstrate these behaviors, e.g. aggression in football and hockey, hard effort (hustle) is rewarded, and so on.

Although the preceding provides some insight into the socialization of the young athlete in youth sports, one can also inquire whether it is the same for children of different ethnic groups. Such data are not available and/or the ethnicity of the young athletes is not considered. One is forced to infer, speculate and hypothesize from general studies of life styles and socialization patterns in various ethnic groups. The usual comparison is that of American Blacks relative to White middle America with little data on other ethnic groups. For example, the rearing environments of the majority of Black and White children in the United States are distinctly different, the lower class and the middle class neighborhood. This is apropos in light of the positive role generally attributed to sports among minority youth. Note, however, that the values and aspirations of ghetto residents are not entirely different from non-ghetto residents (Rodman, 1968). In other words, the so-called culture of poverty is not entirely at variance with the aspirations and values of the American cultural mainstream.

Among Blacks, the literature often assumes that boys learn their masculine roles and identity outside the home in light of an absent or weak father in a mother-dominated family (Schulz, 1969; Abrahams, 1970). Since a good portion of the time of Blacks is spent playing on the streets/and playgrounds, and running errands, they have much contact with older males in the community and do not perhaps experience the emotional deprivation imputed to their lives by the absence of a permanent and strong male figure in the house (Abrahams, 1970). Adult male neighbors and recreation sports leaders serve, perhaps, both as instructors and as an audience for their games and activities. One can also infer a similar father-absence in White middle class families relative to male role models. Since White fathers do not, as a rule, work at home, their role enactment is largely ". . .unobserved, inaccessible and relatively unknown;" boys thus have little chance to emulate their fathers in action (Hannerz, 1969, p. 120).

Thus, both in the lives of Black and White boys there appears to be, to some extent, a lack of constant male model. This perhaps functions to reinforce the strength of male peer groups in the young male's search for his masculine identity. The role of physical prowess, including strength and performance feats, among young males needs little further elaboration. The role of strength and power in the male cultural ideal, a sex role learned early in life, would seem to suggest the importance of extraneous factors affecting the performance of boys. Both Black and White boys are more or less subjected to similar pressures in American society at large, although role models and directives are different for Blacks and Whites, leading to what

some call a "ghetto specific masculinity." For example, they emphasize the role of athletes, their physical accomplishments and life styles, as strong models for ghetto Black youth. The significance of socialization in and through sports and related activities in Black and White youth, however, needs further study before specific effects on performance can be indicated (see Malina, 1973a).

Another observation common to description of socialization among Black children is the constant downgrading of the Black male relative to his female siblings (Schulz, 1969; Abrahams, 1970). This attitude is transmitted to the children early in life and perhaps persists into adulthood. In a study of peer popularity estimates in Black and White children (Baughman and Dahlstrom, 1968), Black girls were consistently rated higher in popularity than Black boys beginning early in the elementary school years. Interestingly, such a sex difference was not noted among White children. The significance of the seemingly constant downgrading as a motivating device to seek excellence through sport needs further elaboration.

Retrospective data on the social situation and sport for a small sample of Black track and field olympic aspirants (n=17) would seem to suggest the preceding inferences and speculations. Relative to White athletes, Black athletes generally grew up in urban centers, in large families, and under lower socio-economic circumstances. Their first interest in sport developed in the neighborhood and home, rather than in school as was more common for White athletes. Prior to and in high school, Black athletes received much positive reinforcement from their mothers, and only at the college level did positive reinforcement from their fathers surface (Kenyon and McPherson, 1973).

The preceding focused on comparisons and inferences on rearing in Black and White boys relative to sport. Such observations can be extended to youngsters of both sexes in different ethnic groups, e.g., Mexican-Americans in Texas. Youngsters of both sexes from different ethnic groups might be encouraged differentially to pursue physical activities and sports. Different ethnic groups might have different expectations of children's interests and potential abilities. Different ethnic groups may view a youngster's participation in sports in a different way, e.g., supportive , indifferent, or in conflict. There may be ethnic differences in the social rewards associated with success in sports. Data relative to these questions are not readily available and merit serious study if we are to understand how youngsters get involved and persist in sports, and perhaps learn positive attitudes and habits of physical activity.

It is also necessary to assess the youth sport needs of different ethnics groups. What are parent's needs and perceptions about youth sports? Is language a barrier to communicating with parents? Do drop out rates vary with ethnicity? In some areas, poverty and race/ethnicity are coterminous. How does this economic differential influence youth sports availability and accessibility? Do some youth drop-out because they must work?

On another level, are there ethnic differences in size, body composition and maturity which may influence youth sports participation and performances? Size differences (stature and weight) between American Black and White children are generally small,

although Black children tend to be slightly taller from about 2 to 12 years of age and White children tend to be slightly heavier (Malina, 1969, 1973b; Garn et al., 1973; Hamill et al., 1973; Malina et al., 1974). Black children tend to have less subcutaneous fat as indicated by thinner skinfold thicknesses (Malina, 1971; Johnston et al., 1972, 1974) and have relatively longer lower extremities (Malina, 1969; Hamill et al., 1973). Data for Hispanic children are less extensive. Observations on Mexican-American children indicate consistently lower weights and statures compared to American Black and White children (Malina and Zavaleta, 1980). Mexican-American school children in Brownsville, Texas (Zavaleta and Malina, 1980), for example, show mean weights and statures that approximate the 25th centile of the U.S. Health Examination Survey reference data, but have triceps skinfold thicknesses which approximate the reference data.

Differences in indices of biological maturity among ethnic groups are also small, but the data are more extensive for Black and White children. The former tend to be slightly advanced in skeletal maturation of the hand and wrist, girls more so than boys (Malina, 1969, 1970; Roche et al., 1975, 1978). Black girls also attain menarche slightly earlier than White girls, 12.5 compared to 12.8 years (MacMahon, 1973).

Although the preceding indicates differences in size, fatness and maturity among ethnic groups in the United States during growth, the magnitude of the differences between Black and White children and youth is small and not sufficient to be of significance

in youth sports programs. The smaller size of Mexican-American children may be of significance in some sports. Nevertheless, in samples of school children, the relationships between anthropometric dimensions as size, proportions and fatness, and strength and motor performance are generally low and at best moderate, (Malina, 1975). For all practical purposes they have limited utility when working with the general population of children and youth. At the level of reasonably outstanding athletic performance, however, there are several trends. Young males who excel in sports such as baseball, football and swimming tend to be advanced in biological maturity status. Young females who excel in sports such as gymnastics and track, on the other hand, tend to be somewhat delayed in biological maturity status. In contrast, young female swimmers tend to approximate the average in their maturity status (Malina, 1978; Malina et al., 1979, in press; Seefeldt and Gould, 1980).

Relative to ethnicity and sports, one often hears of discrimination real or imagined. This is more readily expressed at the more specialized and elite competitive levels. Another more commonly cited form is sexual discrimination. There are, however, other forms of discrimination, and perhaps the most significant relative to youth sports is economic. Affluence of one's parents often determines the pursuit of many sports. For example, in a sample of 77 age group swimmers from 46 families in a University of Texas program, virtually all (92%) came from the highest two social class categories on the Hollingshead two factor index of social position. The media also contributes to discrimination, as they tend to focus on major sports

to the neglect of lesser sports and sporting accomplishments of women.

When ethnicity and sport is considered, reference is often made to the success of some Eastern European countries, most notably the Soviet Union and East Germany, and more recently Romania, and their programs designed to identify athletic potential and nurture it from very young ages. It must be emphasized that in the political ideologies of these countries, sport is a way of life and an avenue to the good life in a system with limited opportunities for individual expression. It is a system that is rigid, leaving little room for improvisation or innovation. In North America, by contrast, sport is often viewed as fun and pleasure for youth, a developmental task, and as recreation for adults, although it is a vocation for a relatively small number of highly skilled adults. Thus, athletes, youth or adult, are essentially volunteers in North America. In eastern European countries, on the other hand, sport is commonly considered a symbol of national culture within the context of their particular political ideology (see for example, Schneidman, 1978; Gilbert, 1980). Nevertheless, within these countries there is considerable cultural variation or pluralism as in North America, and some participants from specific areas with a long history of political independence, e.g., Ukrainia, would prefer to compete under their own flag at international events.

Youth sports must also be viewed within a broader perspective. Presumably, the experience of participation in youth sports contributes to the overall development of the youngster, and among these experiences, habits and attitudes towards sport and physical activity are paramount. In the long run, attitudes toward activity and habits of physical activity should persist from childhood through adolescence into

adulthood. This aspect of youth sports, the "carry-over" value of activities of childhood, has not been fully investigated and evaluated. In other words, what is the relevance of youth sports participation for activity habits in adulthood?

Active participation in physical activity is not a part of the life style of many Americans, although they do not harbor negative attitudes towards exercise and sport. Two recent (in the early and mid-1970's) national surveys of the exercise and sport habits of American adults, for example, indicated that 49 million adults (45%) in one survey, and 69 million (51%) in the other did not exercise regularly (President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 1973, 1974; National Center for Health Statistics, 1978). Interestingly, those who do not exercise were older, less educated, less affluent, and non-white. This, of course, suggests the possibility that the less educated and less affluent are engaged in jobs requiring physical effort. Hence, off-the-job physical activity is minimal.

The most popular exercise among American adults who enage in various forms of exercise was walking, followed by bicycling, swimming, calisthenics, and jogging. Very few of those who cycle, swim or jog did so regularly (at least three times per week). The most popular participatory sport was bowling (20% of American adults participated, but only one in five did so once or twice a week). Second to bowling was swimming (18% of adult population), followed by golf (9%), softball (8.5%), and skiing (2%). Of these sports, only three, swimming, golf and tennis, met the criterion for regular exercise (at least three times per week) (President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 1973).

Although all surveys have limitations, data from the survey of exercise habits of American adults indicate activity levels that are low or at best moderate. It is difficult to infer that these habits are a carry-over from school physical education or community activity programs, but the possibility exists. It has been suggested that the activities learned in sports-oriented physical education programs and in youth sports programs are not suitable for participation in adult years, and many activities emphasized are not sufficiently vigorous in terms of cardio-respiratory fitness. However, individuals who have experienced physical education programs in school or college did engage in exercise more so than those who did not. In addition, former athletes (those who participated in two or more sports in school or college) indicated greater levels of physical activity as adults, particularly in the more vigorous activities, suggesting some carry-over effect (President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 1973, 1974).

Data are lacking on the activity habits and attitudes of children and youth, specifically longitudinal data. A longitudinal survey of West German adolescents, 25 girls and 26 boys (Ilmarinen and Rutenfranz, 1980), provides some insights. Using 4 annual retrospective interviews with a standardized questionnaire, the authors noted a decrease in yearly sport activity in both sexes from 14 to 17 years. In boys, the relative decrease in yearly sport activity was 70% between 15 and 17 years; the corresponding value for girls was 57%, most of the decrease occurring from 14 to 15 years. Comparison of the sport activity scores between the sexes indicated a total sport activity score for boys that was about four times greater than girls at 15 years of age, but only two times greater at 17 years of age. Similar age and sex differences

were apparent when sport activity scores were viewed on a monthly basis.

In this study, youngsters were studied in more detail at 17 years of age, a transitional period from school to work for some. Among boys, those who continued in school and those who pursued an occupation (work) or vocational training, did not differ in yearly sport activity scores. Among girls, on the other hand, the sport activity scores of those who continued in school were two times greater than the occupational/vocational group. What is of interest in this comparison of sport activity of girls are the kinds of activities pursued. The school group participated most often in gymnastics and swimming at 17 years of age, especially the former, while the occupational group showed greater activity in skiing and cycling. In this regard, it is of interest that the girls in the occupational group had higher absolute and relative values of maximal oxygen consumption than the school group at 16 and 17 years, though both groups decreased in this index of fitness from 16 to 17 years.

At 17 years of age, boys in the school and occupational groups did not differ in activities pursued, although the school group participated somewhat more in football (soccer). Maximal oxygen consumption did not differ at 17 years in the boys, but the occupational group decreased significantly in this index from 16 to 17 years. Over this period, the school group maintained their absolute and decreased slightly in relative aerobic capacity (Ilmarinen and Rutenfranz, 1980).

In another study from Europe (Engstrom, 1979), the attitude towards and scope of physical activity (hours per week) were followed in a sample of males and females at 15, 20 and 25 years of age (22% drop out in the original sample). The youth and young adults expressed

a very positive attitude towards physical activity. However, the amount of activity did not correspond to this attitude. The average hours of physical activity per week for boys decreased from 4.8 hours at 15 years to 2.6 hours at 20 years, and then increased to about 2.9 hours per week at 25 years. Corresponding values for girls were 3.3 hours per week at 15 years, 1.8 hours per week at 20 years and 2.2 hours per week at 25 years. The decrease from 15 to 20 years in both sexes (46%) may relate to adolescence per se with its concomitant social demands and career choices.

When viewed in terms of sports club membership, about 18% of the girls were members of sports clubs at each of the three ages compared. In contrast, the percentage of boys who were members of sports clubs decreased from 45% at 15 to 35% at 25 years of age. Members of sports clubs, however, were more active than non-members at all ages. Choice of activities was perhaps related to the sports club membership. Girls most often chose recreational activities (swimming, cycling, walking, dancing) at each age. For boys, competitive sports (ice-hockey and soccer) were most common at 15. At age 20 years, recreational activites (dancing, table tennis) received an equal share with competitive sports (soccer), while at 25 years, recreational activities were most common (dancing, walking, cycling, badminton, jogging).

Although surveys of activity habits are limited, the relevance of such surveys to youth sports needs consideration. Activities offered in youth sports programs are more competition oriented and more oriented to the physically/motorically talented. Nevertheless, those who participate in such programs do tend to continue participation in regular physical activity as adults. Perhaps familiarity and success in sporting

activities during youth engenders a favorable self-concept in and attitude towards activity in general and/or other sporting and recreational activites.

There must also be concern, on the other hand, for those who do not pursue sporting activity during youth, and those who drop out. We may ask why the former do not participate; what is unique about them? And, why the latter cease or reduced participation? Many of those who do not continue to participate remove themselves voluntarily, some are "cut" by coaches, and some simply shift from one sport or activity to another. Research efforts in these areas are increasing, and available results provide some interesting insights. Orlick (1973), for example, interviewed two small samples (16 each of 8 and 9 years old who were and were not participating in sports. Many of the non-participants simply never tried out, believing they could not make the team. Such a view is perhaps related to their own self-concept. Some dropped out, the most often given reason being "they never let me play." Thus, some youngsters are seemingly turned-off at these ages. Is it the emphasis on winning? In a subsequent interview study of 60 youths, 7-19 years, who dropped out of sports (hockey, soccer, baseball, basketball, swimming, cross-country skiing), Orlick and Botterill (1975) noted that 67% dropped out for reasons related to the emphasis on competition, (e.g. too serious, emphasis on winning, sense of failure), 31% left due to the development of other interests, and 2% dropped out due to injuries. Of those who cited competition as a reason for quitting, the program per se and the coach were most often indicated as primary factors (see also McPherson, 1978; Seefeldt and Gould, 1980).

There is need for further study of those who do and do not continue in sport. Data are necessary for specific sports and sport settings. Are there, for example, drop-out rates specific to certain sports? Or, are they similar across all sports in certain types of programs (e.g., win-oriented programs)? The drop-out process is not all negative. Changing sport involvement is a part of normal human development. We would like to know the age-, sex-, maturity- and possible ethnicity-associated variation in activity patterns.

In conclusion, the study of youth sports, the actual participation by children and youth, and the involvement of parents, family, coaches and community, is a fascinating venture. The system is not perfect and there is much that we must do and learn. Much of the available data are based upon limited observations from small samples. Generalizations from such data are somewhat tenuous, but they suggest potentially important trends that merit serious study. Nevertheless, the data base continues to expand. Perhaps some of the information presented at this workshop as well as the comments and interactions will help us better understand the youth sports process and more importantly its benefits for children and youth.

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